

Assamese Theatre*

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When we pause to ponder and search beyond the cyclorama of the theatre, we find that the urge of humanity to express itself has created not only theatre but all the arts—be it poetry, the novel, music, dance, or architecture, or anything that can conceivably be called art in the widest sense. It is common humanity which is the bedrock of all arts and it is on this bedrock that many different structures for, and forms of, theatre have been built, be it the luxurious air-conditioned auditorium of the metropolis or the modest, inadequately equipped, thatch-roofed playhouse in some small town; whether a performance by skilled artists in a cultivated language, or an enthusiastic representation of a humble theme by a group of uncouth urchins in some remote village. So the source of art-creation, in the ultimate analysis, is the same everywhere—the culture of the particular region.

The task of writing an account of the Assamese drama for this seminar has unfortunately fallen on me, in preference to persons definitely more suitable and better equipped to fulfil such an assignment. *Believe me, my feelings at this moment are quite identical to those of a poacher, seeking game on land to which he has no title. Having accepted the assignment, I am obliged to behave like an ignoramus; I have not only gone to learned people for references, but at places I have also conveniently used their language verbatim, because their expressions are both authentic and well-phrased. I hope you will bear with me.*

We may perhaps say that the present Indian theatre in different parts of the country has taken shape, particularly in technique of presentation, under the influence of the European theatre. We all know that during the period of foreign rule, Indian theatre had receded to a position not of dignity or honour and had withered for want of proper encouragement and inspiration. Though a vigorous regeneration of our theatre, as may be expected to follow the political emancipation of the country, has yet to set in, Indian theatre certainly looks as though it has awakened after a long slumber and is being imperceptibly admitted into society to regain its position in the national life of the people. Some accept this development with grace, while some others consider it to be a necessary evil of modern times—the result, at any rate, is that the number of its opponents is dwindling.

When we try to penetrate the past and to find out what kind of theatre was prevalent in Assam before the present forms were established, mostly in towns, we find a type of popular theatre commonly known in Assam as Bhaona performed in almost all the *khels*

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(village units) with popular enthusiasm; it had its roots there as a community festival and has become an inseparable element of Assamese folk life.

The father of Assamese theatre is Shri Shankaradeva (A.D. 1449-1569). It is he who first wrote the drama, conceived the dance, composed the songs and tunes, and harnessed all these for creating the Bhaona, adopting a technique which has not yet been replaced by a better one. Possessed of a creative genius and mastery of every art that makes a living theatre, Shri Shankaradeva gave this theatre form the stamp of religious significance and popularized it in the whole region. The use of painted scenery, as early as in the fifteenth century, was certainly a unique thing for Assam, possibly for the whole of India. Scenes for plays were personally painted by Shri Shankaradeva; he wrote the *Chihna-jatra*, a pageant in painted scenes. His chief motive was to popularize the Krishna legends, especially those connected with the central figure of Krishna. This pattern of theatre has maintained its popularity for more than five centuries. Some artists, under the impact of modern ideas, occasionally venture to give these Bhaonas a coat of new colour, but the essential framework remains unchanged. The inexhaustible Indian epics, which have been the common pool for providing themes and inspiration to authors in and outside India, provided Shri Shankaradeva too with plots for his dramas. In an age when printing was unknown, this great Vaishnavite reformer recognized and used Bhaona as an effective medium to reach and preach to his people. His were all one-act plays (Ankia Nat), and, when elaborately performed, took almost the entire night.

In the context of the brief theatrical performances of the present day, these Bhaonas seem lengthy, although the Nat itself, as a written piece of work, is very short. It is made lengthy in the production with the purpose of prolonging the entertainment for the whole night. Visualizing the period five hundred years ago, when these plays were first created, we have to admit that a full night's entertainment was in the natural order of things not only in Assam but perhaps elsewhere too. It is customary for a Sutradhara of Bhaona to repeat in prose the dialogue already delivered in verse by the actor. The pace of life those days being slow, the audience would generally take time to come from their distant villages and would not ordinarily feel inclined to leave the show until daybreak. Very often these theatrical performances continued also during the day. These sequels were perhaps primarily intended for the amusement of children. There was provision for meals between the day and the night shows. The actual performance was preceded by a big orchestra, played by at least a dozen of what in Assamese are called *gayan-bayans*, singers and instrument-players, for a duration of at least two hours. The forceful rhythm of the orchestra could be heard miles away, and even in the absence of microphones and loudspeakers, the surrounding population which formed the audience could prepare and proceed to the place of the performance. The use of masks in the make-up of characters like Ravana, Vibhishana, Jatayu, Bakasur and others is an important feature of Bhaonas. The *khanikara* (make-up man) either possesses such special properties and lends them to the *khel* troupe, or these remain the property of the *khel* itself. The make-up man fits these masks on the particular character

in the *choo-ghar* (green room) before the beginning of the performance.

Just before the show begins, the Sutradhara addresses the audience after the custom of Sanskrit dramas and introduces the characters with humility, seeking the blessings of God. A comic character (Bahua), whom it would not be wrong to call a clown, occasionally appears in the show, very often just before the entrance of the King, to provide comic relief to the audience. Rakshasas or demons are painted black; devatas or gods, yellow; Krishna, Arjuna, Rama, Draupadi and Sita are painted green (*shyama*). This organic colour make-up, however, is being slowly replaced by modern cosmetics. What is understood as action in the drama is expressed through symbolic gestures as well as dances with *mudras*, and the pathos is very often expressed in song (*vilap*). Throughout the play, the Sutradhara acts as the director. The orchestra hands, the chorus singers, and other musicians are completely integrated in the performance, so much so that they are as essential as any other Bhaoria.

Since these plays were performed in the *namghars* of Assamese village *khels*, where naturally all the actors were not literate, the role of Sutradhara had to be taken by someone who could read the dramas and could prompt. Open direction and prompting are accepted in Bhaona as necessary aids. The roles of Sutradhara, who had to be a literate person, and of Krishna, to whom very often all the actors had to bow low, were commonly taken by a Brahmin or a man of superior caste, conforming to the social code of the time. With the spread of literacy, these restrictions or limitations are disappearing, and the roles are beginning to be distributed to suit the natural talent of actors.

Though it is not possible to speak with authority about what kind of theatre had existed in Assam before Shri Shankaradeva created the Bhaona, it may safely be said that the miniature folk play known in Assam as Oja-pali, with music, dialogue, and body movements, must have existed and given stimulus to the production of Bhaonas by Shri Shankaradeva.

Shri Shankaradeva and his great disciple, Shri Madhabadeva, created Bhaonas and used this forceful medium to bring the tenets of Vaishnavism to the people. There pervades in the Bhaonas a sense of austerity; acting by women is inadmissible.

Bhaonas are performed in the *namghar*, generally a two-roofed thatched structure which combines the stage and the auditorium. It is a big multipurpose house used as a prayer-hall, a seat of justice where local disputes are settled and matters of current interest discussed. Attached to the *namghar* is the *manikut* where, upon a wooden throne—*simhasana*—an image of Vishnu is kept. Only a select few can enter the *manikut*.

Though born out of religious motives, the Bhaona also began to serve the purpose of recreation. It also gained an additional impetus when the Ahom kings selected Bhaona for the amusement of royal courts and patronized its performances with elaborate arrangements on important occasions.

Satradhikars have made the most vital contribution to this theatre by having carefully preserved the tradition of the Bhaona in their respective *satras**. Their personal participa-

* *Satras* are Vaishnava monastic establishments of Assam, each headed by a Satradhikar.

tion in the Bhaona has lent prestige to the theatre. It is customary for many of them to write dramas and direct performances, as well to give evidence of their artistic accomplishments before formal accession to their title of priesthood.

In the early nineteenth century, when Assam was passing through a series of political catastrophes, culminating ultimately in the occupation of the country by the British, Bhaona lost a good deal of the participation of the people on account of the continued uncertainties that prevailed. It also lost the patronage of the Ahom kings who lost their sovereignty. Assam came to be a British possession in 1826 and along with this naturally started the dominance of things European, particularly English—be it language or education, custom or costume, manners or modes.

During the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century, the new theatre came to Assam through the Calcutta stage and slowly began to establish itself in the different towns of Assam. With the introduction of English education, the influence became more and more direct and, as a result, the Bhaona receded to the villages, leaving to her new, fashionable sister undisputed domain of the towns. At this stage, occasional amateur performances of new plays were held in improvised playhouses on the occasion of festivals like Durga Puja, which slowly became a custom. In the leading towns of Assam, a sort of semi-permanent building for dramatic performances came up, adjoining the compound of the Durga Puja *mandap*. The reason for the popular enthusiasm for holding theatrical performances during the Durga Puja could be the immigration of Bengalis, who were now coming to Assam in good numbers to fill up posts created by the new rulers in their new administrative set-up.

A number of Assamese writers wrote plays to meet the demand of amateur groups, but translation of Bengali dramas was considered an easier job. The British having introduced Bengali as the court language in preference to Assamese, the initiative to write plays in Assamese perhaps received a setback.

There is no professional theatre in Assam, and therefore acting as a profession has yet to grow. The amateur theatre societies that were formed in almost every town to produce an occasional drama, particularly on the occasion of Durga Puja or other festivals, grappled with the entire problem relating to the modern play and its production. It is these amateur dramatic clubs that have directly inspired the creation of modern dramatic literature in Assam. 'Appetite comes with eating', as the French say, but many Assamese dramas were created in the reverse process when a club resolved to hold a performance without even having a play to stage. Such theatre societies felt that the first hurdle in the path of theatre was lack of suitable plays. Some members, out of their zeal to fulfil the demands of their clubs, wrote dramas, and very often the characters in these plays were modelled with an eye on the local actors. But occasional amateur performances cannot help much to create a theatre, because it cannot sustain a set of artists permanently, which is essential for the growth and development of theatre.

Again, there has been occasional participation in this or that play by a few girls, but their

numbers could be counted on one's fingers—the idea of participation in theatre by women has yet to find favour in Assamese society. The absence of women from the theatre is creating a real difficulty. To look for a fair boy in place of a girl to appear in a female role is the practice of most of the theatre societies. But on the other hand, young people, who are attracted to the stage for the sake of leisurely cultivation of the dramatic art, are welcoming women to the dramatic clubs; therefore, it will soon be time for Assamese women to say whether their interest in the stage is permanent or only temporary. Perhaps, within a decade or two, Assamese women will take their natural place in theatre as they are doing in social life. Their interest in this art is at present far too trivial to vitalize the theatre in the real sense.

Holding a performance is really a stupendous job in Assam. Most of the playhouses are, to say the least, inadequately equipped. As some of them have no electricity, lighting arrangements have to be temporarily made, seats have to be borrowed either from offices or from schools, and dates of performances, therefore, are fixed preferably on Saturdays, Sundays or on holidays to suit the convenience of the management and of the actors who come from different walks of life. The secretary of the club or a few enthusiasts have to be on the lookout for a 'squeaking Cleopatra boy' to play the part of the heroine.

On account of the amateur character of the societies, the arts that contribute to a smooth production have yet to be harnessed to the theatre. The theatre elsewhere has called to its aid other arts like music, painting, and architecture, and is also availing of the techniques of several crafts. A producer, therefore, must have at his disposal today, besides acting talent, a group of specialized workers in these arts, working to a common rhythm to achieve the same object and to produce the same aesthetic effect. Though at times sporadic successes are achieved in amateur performances, surpassing the most optimistic expectations, the total effect is generally missed.

Theatre has passed through many vicissitudes and has, in the present century, withstood the assault of the cinema. As a medium of entertainment, it is perhaps less popular but certainly more lively than her rival. In Assam, the taste for theatre is growing and audiences are also widening, but the present theatre societies are incapable of properly utilizing opportunities for the growth of theatre. There is no spacious playhouse in any town in Assam. And such is the state of playhouses in Assam that the enthusiasm for producing a play is very often lost in the drudgery of tiring preliminaries.

Because the theatre has an inherent force and a capacity for attracting spectators, its call is generally responded to by people who fill up the auditorium as admiring audience. A few of them venture further and seek to express themselves before the footlights. Since the dramatic theme is always a treatment of human life, the few who face the footlights as actors are the most essential human elements of theatre needed to create the illusion for which the entire community expectantly waits. There is again a group of quiet workers who sweat unseen behind the curtain and help in the creation of this illusion. Attracted by the inherent force of the theatre and undaunted by the limitations of the present Assamese playhouses, a number of young people, mostly from colleges and universities, are filling up the ranks of

theatre workers and vitalizing the theatre movement in Assam with new blood.

These young theatre enthusiasts, in search of a plot or a theme, do not hesitate to go beyond the orbit of their own regional theatre. They look into obscure corners of their own home and far beyond, and whenever they come upon something useful for the theatre, whether it is a simple folk tune or a story by foreign writer, they make an earnest attempt to mould, incorporate, and adapt it for their own audience. This is comparatively easy today because the world is becoming smaller and there are facilities for an easier flow of ideas. But the sense of selection of these enthusiasts and their acquired craft of moulding things to suit their own requirements have combined to give a certain colour to their work. Strictly speaking, they do not deserve the credit of original creation, but from the point of utility, these are as good as Hindustan cars, moved by Morris motive power.

While Assamese Bhaona is more like an arena theatre, the open-air theatre is not very common in Assam. Closest to an open-air theatre in Assam is what is called Hazari-bhaona—the theatre of a thousand. On a suitable occasion, when the climate is congenial, ten or twelve *khels* select an extensive field as the venue and each *khel* performs a Bhaona on the same night under different *pandals*, making it possible for a large audience to witness the performances. Through the centralization of the *khels* for a night, Hazari-bhaona fulfils, though in a different way, the objects of an open-air theatre—one purpose of which is to entertain a much wider audience than is possible within the four walls of an auditorium. For the purpose of holding such Hazari-bhaonas, there is a permanent organization in Assam, a committee of the leading representatives of *khels*, which determines the place and the time of a Hazari-bhaona and also works out a programme convenient to the different *khels* and the people. Dozens of small shops spring up around the *pandals* of Hazari-bhaona to entertain visitors for the night with betel leaf, tea and refreshments. Such a gathering of thousands of people in a carefree, merry mood makes for a gala night.

When we compare cultural activities in Manipur with those in Assam, one feature cannot escape our attention. While the dance and the Bhaona have been existing in rural areas of Assam as living heritage, to be only occasionally referred to and boasted about in discourse, in Manipur the heritage of dance has supplemented the modern theatre winning the enthusiastic participation of all people, both male and female. The two plants of culture, one in the valley of the Brahmaputra and the other in the oval valley of Manipur, seem to be of the same origin, though the former is gradually receding from the national scene to small pockets in the countryside, while the latter is flourishing in towns, drawing the sap of inspiration from the enthusiasm of the people. One wonders if this is so because of the participation of women in Manipur and their being barred by tradition in Assam.

Assam has yet to establish a permanent theatre. At present, there is neither a professional troupe nor a central playhouse with regular performances by the best of the available talent. As someone rightly described the Assamese theatre, it is an amateur's art and a leisure-time enterprise. The absence of a permanent theatre in the State makes an artist uncertain about his career. Instead of cultivating his gift, the artist who might have adorned

the Assamese stage feels painfully obliged to seek work and security in some sphere of activity where his dramatic talent is least required. Thus, for want of scope, what could have been a valuable asset to an individual becomes a heavy liability, a cause for frustration. There are scores of instances in Assam where talented people have taken premature leave of the stage and are struggling hard to fit into a different vocation, for which they are least suited. The only way to prevent such waste of talent is for the State to give the theatre academic status and prestige.

Such an unhappy state of affairs in the realm of theatre might be prevailing in other States also. To take care of the cultural requirements of the people is the natural duty of a government, the urgency of which is heightened by the imposition of amusement taxes. Instances of financial grants, however meagre, indicate the desire of the Government to encourage cultural activities, including the theatre, through non-official organizations, as is evident from the establishment of the Akademis, both at the Centre and in the States. But a clearer declaration of policy should be made to emphasize the sense of urgency of the situation.

It may be illuminating to know how much support the theatre has received from the state in European countries, in order to make appropriate provisions for theatre in our own country. Here are a few figures:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Annual amount (in Rupees)</i>
France	.. 130 lakhs
Belgium (a country smaller than Punjab)	.. 10 lakhs
The Netherlands	.. 12 lakhs
Denmark (population less than one third of Punjab)	.. 27 lakhs
Norway	.. 2½ lakhs
Sweden	.. 6 lakhs
Russia	.. Theatres have been nationalized. There were 222 amateur dramatic clubs before the Revolution, and 95,600 in 1939.

The theatre has attained a position of prestige in the West and, consequently, it has attracted new talent to vitalize the art. But in India, and particularly in Assam, such a situation has yet to develop.

Music to please the ear, settings to establish the location, acting to carry conviction of reality, techniques of lighting and other stagecraft to create effects, and above all a director to present the story with perfect precision—all this has yet to be introduced in most productions in Assam. In an unsuitable playhouse, very often, audiences are obliged to gaze at the blank curtain longer than they are able to see the acting for which they pay. The amplified canned music of gramophone records, replacing the live orchestra of the theatre,

creates such vexation that the right mood for appreciation of the performance is very often lost.

Dramatists figure prominently on the world literary scene. During the twentieth century, nine Nobel Prizes for literature have gone to dramatists. In comparison, we find a totally different situation in Assam, where the theatre, being in a withered state, has failed so far to awaken or to attract the talent that could make it a lively channel of communication. The Assamese theatre has been a sort of feeble soliloquy. It has not succeeded in calling to her aid the sister arts of music and dance, the skills of the architect, the mechanic and the painter, and thus to be really a multiple art, fit to be called 'the orchestration of a number of distinct arts'.

There has been, however, a new endeavour by the Government of Assam to invigorate the dramatic art by sanctioning a sum of Rs 1,40,000 to seven leading dramatic clubs, at the rate of Rs 20,000 each, on the stringent condition that a like amount be raised by the clubs as well to qualify for the grant. It is difficult to say how many of these clubs can fulfil this condition.

Another endeavour has been to establish the Assam Central Theatre (ACT), under the auspices of Assam Sangeet Natak Academy (Assam Kala Parishad). The Assam Academy took this decision in May 1954, and has set up a Board of Management for ACT with the Education Minister as Chairman and the Finance Minister as Treasurer. The Board also includes other representatives, suitable persons with knowledge of drama and experience of theatre. The Assam Sangeet Natak Academy has drawn up a Constitution for the Board of Management of the Assam Central Theatre, which, in its preamble, states:

The Central Theatre should be federal in pattern so that the theatre societies by their affiliation may derive strength and vitality from a well-knit federal organization, without having to sacrifice their own individualism and colour in favour of uniformity. The most important requisite, however, of the Assam Central Theatre is that it should correspond to the collective need and appreciation of the people.

With all these ideas and objects, as set forth in the Constitution, the Board of Management has drawn up a plan and a scheme which have been submitted to the Government of Assam and also to the Sangeet Natak Akademi, urging the former specifically to allot a spacious plot of land in the town of Nowgong and sanction a sum of about Rs 17,00,000. The reaction of the Government and the Sangeet Natak Akademi to this proposal are awaited.

The modern Assamese drama actually started its career at the beginning of the twentieth century and thus, in its present form, has not completed even the first century of its existence—a period far too brief for the normal growth of a literature and more particularly of dramatic literature, which requires simultaneous development in practical theatre. Tradition grows slowly. It will also be relevant to remember another factor—that is, in Assam the older theatre form, the Bhaona of five hundred years, has been more or less abandoned as

obsolete by the educated, and the modern theatre form has been planted on the stage in imitation of other regions without full knowledge or experience of the new form.

Assam's stage, both during the time of Shri Shankaradeva and the present period, has been the preserve of men alone. But playwrights who conceive the themes of dramas could not avoid creating female characters as well. As a result, not only in Assam but perhaps all over India, men have had to play women's roles on the stage. Previously, this denial of the right of women to appear before the footlights was easy to enforce, because the producers of theatre were also very often the privileged leaders of society. The audience was also accustomed to the convention and willing to be preached to, instructed, and even be corrected. But the present audience pays for the theatre and has thus imperceptibly acquired the right to be amused and entertained. This audience is not prepared to see a clean-shaven young man duping them with a wig and a veil. It generally responds to the theatre with laurels and applause but, when outraged, may also assert their right and may instead send catcalls to the actors for daring to dupe them.

The early Assamese dramatists wrote dramas mostly on themes taken from mythology and history. Other theatre enthusiasts translated similar dramas from the literatures of neighbouring parts of the country, to be produced through the newly formed theatre societies in improvised playhouses. Some of the original Assamese dramas were good literature but unsuitable for the stage, and might survive as pieces of literature longer than some plays that had an immediate success on the stage. But no drama will do for all time, and these plays, in spite of their former novelty, are out of date for the modern stage. They have nothing to say to the fastidious modern audience and have therefore outlived their utility.

The present tendency of the audience is to see their own suppressed mind projected on the stage through theme and action. They desire to see their own life as it is lived in everyday pursuits mirrored in the play. They relish a play and enjoy it when they find their own problems transferred to the stage effectively. Their predilection for such plays has resulted in a greater attention being paid to social dramas, which are becoming more and more popular. These audiences even seek a reportrayal of ancient characters which, as entertainment, offers a feast of miracle and mystery. They want to hear clever dialogues of heroes and heroines that would not only delight them but would also make them feel the power of their own language. They want to hear a tune difficult to compose but easy to imitate, to be able to whistle them when they return after the show. Maybe, in practical life, they feel the inadequacy of language as a medium of expression of their confused ideas and consequently seek in the theatre an echo and a pictorial representation of their mind and ideas.

These and many other tendencies developing in the modern audiences now subscribing to the theatre, and replacing the old aristocracy that earlier patronized the art, have created a growing demand for social dramas, which can reflect the joys, sorrows, and problems of the common man. The Assamese theatre, unfortunately, has not so far been able to fulfil even a part of this new demand. This constitutes one reason, besides of course many

others, for its comparatively slower development. It is not intended to say that Assamese literature has no social drama, but adequate numbers of published dramas, offering a wide range for selection in the showrooms of booksellers, are not coming forth. The number of social dramas is actually very small, and Assamese theatre has yet to attain the stage when it will be the true reflection of our life. But the cause for this may also be that it is at present passing through a period of transition, from budding to blossoming.

Actors as a class must drill themselves and toil to fit into their roles before they take their make-up and feel glamorous before the footlights. But can such a set of artists be available in a society where theatre is just an amateur art and a leisure-time pursuit? Can a busy contractor, a tired officer or an office assistant, a preoccupied lawyer, coming from different walks of life and forming a heterogeneous group, fulfil the duties of a consummate actor? Definitely, that is expecting too much. Theatre is neither a busy man's leisure activity nor a lazy man's business.

Then, is it necessary to replace the amateur theatre societies with professional troupes? No. Amateur societies have fostered the public taste for the art and introduced the idea of theatrical-club life to a very wide circle of people. Their active participation in creating theatre during the present period, going back to more than half a century, has been a preparation for the next phase. In the next phase, or in subsequent phases of the Assamese theatre, amateur societies should continue to exist, and perhaps they will. What is urgently necessary is to raise the potentialities of these clubs so as to make them capable of offering a more comprehensive entertainment to the people whose need for such diversion and escape is growing. The history of most of these clubs will reveal the accumulated sacrifice of a group of persons over a number of years. But now, when the functions of Government cover almost all spheres of national life, cultural activities can naturally claim attention and action by the state which can help by removing the financial hurdles standing in the way of healthy growth of the dramatic clubs. This would perhaps make the flow of creative energy to these clubs smoother. In brief, the Assamese dramatic clubs need to be subsidized, more urgently so because, alternatively, there are no professional troupes in Assam to keep the flag of theatre flying.

It is generally in a city that a commercial theatre can hold regular shows and collect subscriptions from a numerous population, but in the absence of a city in Assam, floating a commercial troupe is considered hazardous. Even the leading headquarter towns of Assam, where Assamese theatre may legitimately expect a reception, do not hold out a good prospect for a touring theatre. The ill-equipped playhouses need a good deal of property, both for the stage and the auditorium, to be really fit for a performance. The whole affair, when worked out in detail—from borrowing chairs to arranging electrification where it is not provided, besides the usual trouble of arranging temporary accommodation for the touring troupe—is so discouraging that one is apt to give it up as something far too stupendous, let alone be remunerative.

Assessing a problem or a situation is necessary for any solution to the problem, or any

improvement in the situation. The Assamese theatre needs such an assessment. Whatever the findings may be, and however colossal the difficulties may seem to be, we should remain undaunted and surmount the hurdles that clog the flow of theatrical life. Conscious of this responsibility, the Assam Central Theatre under the auspices of the Assam Sangeet Natak Academy has taken the decision to establish the first central playhouse and through it to make available facilities ordinarily not within the reach of individual amateur dramatic clubs. The persistent efforts that will be needed for the practical realization of its aspirations have yet to be made. But unless the Government comes to the aid of the theatre, such enthusiasm is bound to die out.

Taking, however, an optimistic view of the situation and supposing that both the people and the Government are aroused and respond in the expected measure, should we expect a golden age of the Assamese theatre to set in? *Perhaps not so easily and so early.* Nobody can bring about a golden age, just as nobody can create a revolution; but with earnest work, it is possible to create conditions under which theatre as a medium and as an art form may thrive to delight the community and enhance our culture.

In order to speak with an effective voice, theatre must receive, in addition to other contributions, literary and intellectual succour in the form of dramas, criticism, and ideas, and should be able to propagate its own mission.

Possessed of a mere spark of creative talent, artists themselves at times have done great disservice to the cause of theatre. Being used to feigning and pretending in their art, they carry the same pretence outside the stage, and desire to be treated by others as angels and even hope to be judged by separate standards of behaviour, expecting latitude and laxity. To say the least, this is snobbery. Possessing creative talent as a gift of nature, these artists, instead of preserving and cultivating their faculty to its full blossoming, are often led ignorantly to exploit it too much. This results in the wastage of abilities which could otherwise have attained maturity. A few preliminary successes arouse in artists a pride which makes them artificial. They begin to forget that it is imperative for them to work hard. Their work certainly lends them a glamorous halo, but at the same time it imposes on them the obligation to work hard, to be able to entertain fastidious audiences by faithfully depicting always what is new and true. Genius is ninety-nine per cent perspiration and one per cent inspiration. But these people, in their self-conceit, wait for ninety-nine per cent inspiration, which seldom comes to them.

Of all the popular arts, the position of theatre in society seems to be the most debated. One opinion views the theatre as the burial ground of prestige and tradition, while another group is attracted to it by the enthusiasm that theatre arouses and the adoration that it receives from the people. These two extreme groups live on two opposite poles of the world. Without disputing the opinion held by either of the groups, it will perhaps be profitable to take the middle path of the wise, because every opinion, however adverse, may contain some grain of truth, and deserves at least to be tolerated. Now that the theatre has been enriched by contributions from the brightest intellectuals of our times in the form of their

masterpieces, it is certainly not threatened with extinction. Exponents of theatre can therefore treat their opponents with tolerance and grace. For tactical reasons, they should be able to retreat and be willing to lose an argument, with the ultimate aim of winning their case. But those who want to live for the theatre must go on practising it.

Having heard so much about the Assamese theatre, groups from other regions of India may like to know what constructive programme is envisaged by the leaders of Assamese cultural life to invigorate our theatrical tradition.

To speak candidly, we have no ready scheme at present. However, a sense of obligation to this art form is growing, awakening ideas for the development of the art that might have lain dormant in individual minds. All these need to be collected and compared before application.

The Assam Central Theatre has been organized with all these ideas in view. As an institution, it intends to synthesize the cooperative efforts of the people for the development of its theatre. It has therefore called to the helm of its affairs select persons who lead a more devoted and a less glamorous life. The problems of Assamese theatre are sought to be approached by this group with resolution and an open mind, which bears the memory of yesterday and sparkles with the hope of tomorrow.

DISCUSSION

A Delegate: Have you grown sceptical about the whole business?

Chandra Kant Phookan: On the contrary, I am very hopeful. I can positively say that within a year or two, Assam will have a number of playhouses of its own.

A Delegate: Even if the clubs fail to collect Rs 20,000 each?

Chandra Kant Phookan: Even then, I believe. The Government grant-in-aid of Rs 20,000 will not lapse even in case a club fails to raise the same amount through its own efforts. It will get exactly the same amount from the Government as it is able to collect. In case a club is able to collect only five thousand rupees, it will get an equal amount from the Government. But below that figure no application for aid will be entertained. The Assam Government feels that it cannot take the responsibility of running a number of theatres indefinitely. It wants amateur clubs to rise to the occasion and seek public support. So the Government will be making fifty per cent contribution.

Balraj Sahni: Does the Government exercise any discrimination in extending this help?

Chandra Kant Phookan: It does not. Only, the clubs should be registered and their accounts should be open to audit by the Government.

Balraj Sahni: What about the entertainment tax?

Chandra Kant Phookan: It is there. But the tax is levied with due regard to individual cases. Charity performances are exempt from the tax. But the producers still have to submit accounts.

B. Kanakalingeswara Rao: Are you happy about the tax?

Chandra Kant Phookan: No. I feel the tax must not be there hindering the growth of drama and theatre. But I have more faith in the strength of constructive work.

A Delegate: What is that?

Chandra Kant Phookan: Allow me to give you an idea about what we are doing in the State Sangeet Natak Academy. When we thought of starting the Central Theatre, we made it perfectly clear to all theatre associations that they would not lose their individual entities. We were very anxious to preserve their distinctive characters. Secondly, we are very happy to have the kind patronage of our Chief Minister who does not want the Central Theatre to be utilized to serve party interests. It was made very clear to him that the proposed theatre must not be made a propaganda platform, either of his own government or of any other government. He immediately assured us by saying, "Yes, this will be a purely cultural platform. And I am here to prevent it from being used by any party." On this assurance we have devoted ourselves wholeheartedly to building up the theatre. We are having repeated shows of one-act plays and are organizing festival performances. Our colleges are organizing inter-collegiate drama competitions.

A Delegate: Any other constructive work?

Chandra Kant Phookan: Sure. We have divided the Academy into three sections. One is the research section. This section works with the help of the publicity department of the Government of Assam. It deals with songs and dances that are fast dying out. We heard that a certain lady sixty years of age was the only living expert in a distinct form of dance. The form would disappear with her death. We approached her and requested her to give us a demonstration. She readily agreed and also allowed us to get it filmed. We have done it. And it is now in the Academy as a treasure of Assamese art. Some devotional songs are sung in a certain way in some parts of the State and in quite a different way in other parts. We have recorded both variants in such cases. We have engaged experts to find out how dance and music may be standardized and to what extent. The Government gives grants-in-aid to music schools, which make it compulsory for every student to learn local tunes before they go in for classical music.

Dina Pathak: I want to know something more about the Hazari-bhaona described in your paper. What is the actual form? What is the economic background that makes the festival self-supporting? How is the income divided among all the troupes giving simultaneous performances at one place?

Chandra Kant Phookan: The actual form of the Hazari-bhaona is already given in my paper. Now let me tell you how it is organized. Groups meet on a full-moon night and discuss the procedure. They set up separate *pandals* in the same village about a hundred feet apart

from one another. You find five to ten groups giving simultaneous performances. The audience chooses for itself the performances it wishes to see. It is not unusual for a part of the audience to visit all the performances one after another all through the night. They gather before one *pandal* and when they are bored or when they feel they have had enough of that particular show, they move on to the next and so on and so forth. These are free shows—they are after all Bhaonas. The expenses are borne by the village units. There is no question of profit or a sharing of it.

P.V. Rajamannar: Is this practised even today?

Chandra Kant Phookan: As far as Bhaona is concerned, it is performed in most villages even today.